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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001867

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NSC FOR CBARTON
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/10/2014
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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S TRIP TO ZULIA STATE - JUNE 3-5

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor, for Reason 1.4(d)
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Summary

[1](#)1. (U) The Ambassador's trip to Zulia State June 3-5 concentrated on the Maracaibo area. The trip marks the Ambassador's second trip to the region since October 2004. The Ambassador met again with the mayors of Maracaibo and San Francisco, as well as state's Governor. He also met with local business leaders and community groups, visited a clinic run by an American foundation, and gave the commencement address for the international school. The Ambassador received extensive press coverage, and granted separate interviews with the area's leading print and broadcast news outlets. He emphasized potential areas of cooperation, including educational and cultural exchanges as well as social investment projects. End Summary.

Political Leaders

[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador met with COPEI-affiliated Mayor of San Francisco municipality Saady Bijani upon arrival in Maracaibo on June 3. Bijani is the president of the Venezuelan Mayors Association, and he used the meeting to plug for the potential role of local government in constructing positive bilateral dialogue. The Ambassador responded by identifying areas of potential cooperation which included exploring relationships between mayoralities in the U.S. and Venezuela, establishing a relationship with Bijani's Mayors Association, and educational and social investment programs. Bijani suggested that scholarships for English study could be offered jointly with the Venezuelan-American Center in Zulia (CEVAZ) and presented at an awards ceremony around the 4th of July.

[1](#)3. (C) The Ambassador met with MVR Mayor of Maracaibo Giancarlo DiMartino on the morning of June 4. The Ambassador and DiMartino discussed means of deepening the U.S.-Venezuelan relationship at the local government level, including sister city relationships and exchange programs. DiMartino pointed out that exchanges would make more sense if they were structured on a local government-local government basis. There was a brief press conference following the meeting.

[1](#)4. (C) Governor Manuel Rosales hosted a private luncheon for the Ambassador on June 4 at the Governor's mansion. According to Rosales, Chavez has taken over Venezuela's democratic institutions and is on the way to creating a Castro-like dictatorship in the country. The Ambassador and the Governor discussed possible strategies for containing Chavez's assault on democracy, including playing Chavista corruption against the regime, publicizing Chavez's takeover of the judicial system and other democratic institutions, and penetrating Chavez's base by developing relationships with key Governors and Mayors. Rosales estimated there were as many as 10,000 Cubans in Zulia alone, fortified by income from narcotrafficking and their relationships with Colombian guerrillas. (Embassy note: This number seems unrealistically high.) Rosales asserted that the ultimate objective of the Cuban presence is the takeover of Colombia.

Business Leaders

[1](#)5. (C) The Ambassador hosted a coffee for several oil industry executives on the morning of June 3. Representatives from Chevron, Baker Hughes, Halliburton, Weatherford and Grupo Western attended. The discussion centered on the status of PDVSA as a partner and on the changing business environment. Participants viewed PDVSA as a political organization whose lack of an in-house skillbase, poor organizational communications, and inability to make decisions hampered its use as a partner. In terms of the business environment, representatives noted that payments

were increasingly an issue, and that accounts receivable wait-times had expanded significantly. Local content was seen as a Government priority that overrode basic business issues like cost effectiveness, although participants noted that

local content regulations were not equally applied to PDVSA.

16. (U) The Ambassador was the keynote speaker at a June 3 commerce luncheon co-hosted by the Zulian Chamber of Industry and the Maracaibo Chamber of Commerce. Approximately 160 business leaders turned out to hear the Ambassador's remarks which focused on the status of the bilateral relationship. Questions concerned visas, energy, and the status of the bilateral relationship.

7 (U) The Ambassador traveled to Standard Seafood de Venezuela on the afternoon of June 4. Standard Seafood pioneered the shrimp industry in Venezuela - shrimp is currently Venezuela's leading agricultural export. After touring Standard Seafood's processing plant, the Ambassador met with members of the Venezuelan Shrimp Producers Association (ASOPROCO) and with the American Soybean Association representative for Venezuela. Discussion focused on the recent outbreak of the taura virus which negatively impacted production, on ASOPROCO's plans for a genetic reference center and pathology laboratory, and on the challenges faced by the shrimp industry in Venezuela.

Community Groups

18. (U) The Ambassador toured the Casa Hogar Amor y Fe clinic on June 3. The clinic provides treatment and counseling for patients with Huntington's disease and is subsidized by the U.S.-based Hereditary Disease Foundation. The Ambassador spoke with Dr. Margot de Young, the Venezuelan physician in charge of the clinic's daily operations, about the physical and mental effects of the disease, the clinic's work in providing treatment, and about the possibility of a cure.

19. (C) The Venezuelan-American Center of Zulia (CEVAZ) hosted a reception for the Ambassador on June 3, following a press conference introducing CEVAZ's newly elected board. CEVAZ's General Director, Ilse Chemaly, formally introduced the new board to the Ambassador and the assembled press corps. The Ambassador spoke individually with the members of the new board at the reception, and requested that they consider providing access to the virtual presence post site being developed for Maracaibo by the Embassy's public affairs section. CEVAZ's board indicated their initial support for the idea.

110. (C) The Ambassador met with the leaders of the Centro de Formacion Ciudadana on the afternoon of June 4. The Centro de Formacion is a pro-opposition group which is part of the national organization of Asambleas de Ciudadanos. The group currently receives support from the Zulian Chamber of Industry and is looking to expand its support base. The group's leaders briefed the Ambassador on their vision, objectives and implementation plan for creating a series of community workshops which would educate the public on what makes a good citizen. The Ambassador indicated that any Embassy support the organization received would be public, and suggested that the organization's leaders approach other embassies for support as well.

School

111. (U) The Ambassador gave the commencement speech for the 32nd graduating class of Escuela Bella Vista (EBV) on the evening of June 4. The graduation ceremony was held in the school's new auditorium, and the Ambassador was introduced by the head of the school board, Richard Cooper, after remarks by the school's principals and the class Valedictorian and Salutatorian.

Media Outlets

112. (C) The Ambassador met with Esteban Pineda, Panorama's publisher, on the morning of June 3 at Panorama's offices. The Ambassador and Pineda discussed Zulia's political relationship with the national government, the impact of Zulia's recent floods, private sector social investment in the community and border security issues. According to Pineda, Zulia's local political leadership is moving towards

an improved working relationship with the national government on technical infrastructure issues - bridges, roads - that Zulia needs to resolve. After his private meeting with Pineda, the Ambassador gave an on-the-record interview which

touched primarily on bilateral relations, and the Posada Carriles extradition.

113. (C) The Ambassador gave three interviews to Globovision Zulia and its 24/7 news offshoot Tele N. Interview discussion points ranged from baseball to bilateral relations. After his interviews, the Ambassador met with the members of Globovision Zulia's board and President Elvin Portillo in which Portillo discussed the financial impact of the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television on station operations. According to Portillo, the law has given the station less wiggle room to manage its business by imposing severe programming restrictions which impact on profits. Portillo showed the Ambassador a letter from the Ministry of Communications outlining the Government's advertising requirements and specifying the times the ads should run.

114. (U) The Ambassador met with representatives from the Guajira region-based Wayuu and Anu Indian communities prior to giving an interview on Radio Fe y Alegria's bilingual radio program serving the Guajira area. The Ambassador discussed the community's struggle to maintain its identity via Guajira-based media and bi-lingual education, referencing the experience of indigenous communities in the U.S. He addressed the challenge of urban migration and the difficulty in maintaining a separate way of life in the face of urban pressures to assimilate. During his interview, the Ambassador donated books worth approximately \$3K to representatives from two Indian community libraries who accepted the donation on the air.
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